

Ruth rubbed her lower back and moaned, "Oh my sacroiliac." Ellis looked around at the pictures on the walls: extinct bovines and mammoths and stick-figure men and their God — a glowing yellow sun....

And he said, "Hey Ruth, are we dead or what?"

SHE'S NINETEEN YEARS OLD

— for Peter Bakowski

It was a back-yard reception, and Bill slunk through the house and elbowed around the fools who were dancing on the patio and made a beeline for the keg out on the lawn. He gulped his first plastic cupful down then poured another and leaned back against the redwood fence to watch the ladies in their hats and Sunday dresses.

"Bill, my man, I need a favor." It was the father of the bride, Hugh. He leaned on the fence next to Bill with a tumbler full of whiskey, his suit coat over his shoulder, his hula girl tattoo peeking through the thick black hair on his forearm.

"Sure, Hugh, what can I do for you?"

"Bill," he says, sipping his whiskey, squinting at the dancers, "my younger daughter's feeling like a bit of a wallflower today. You know how it is, big sister getting married and all."

"Must be rough, Hugh."

"Yeah. Well, what I'd like you to do for me, Bill, is go and ask her to dance, you know, maybe make a play for her."

"I'm a little old for her, aren't I, Hugh?"

"Bull, Bill. What are you? Twenty-five, twenty-six?"

"Thirty-one."

"Oh. Well hell, it doesn't matter anyway; she'll probably turn you down. I just wanna make sure she doesn't get ignored."

She accepted and asked him while they danced to hundred-and-twenty decibel Prince — cupping her hand around his ear and bouncing her warm breath off the side of his face — if he had a car.



They sat in the front seat smoking dope and listening to a Muddy Waters tape until Hugh ripped open his door, dragged him into the street and screamed, "What the fuck do you think you're doin', man? She's nineteen years old."

#### A GOOD-LOOKING TOMATO

The strongest thread holding Bill to his ten years now of grill cooking at the Loma Alta Cafe is the opportunity the job affords him to prey on the steady stream of come-and-go waitresses that roll in and out of the place. A slobbering and hedonistic opportunist is Bill, but lately the old girl, Betty, has been cramping his style.

Betty was hired on three years ago as a waitress but she has evolved into a de facto assistant manager, running the joint when the owner is away, and she has taken it upon herself to warn all the new girls about Bill's proclivities, bringing up the specter of venereal disease, since, "...that rutting pig has stuck his little thing in 'bout every dirty hole between San Diego and L.A."

Some of the girls find that type of unprincipled behavior perversely appealing — a challenge in wild animal domestication — and Bill still gets his share, considering his low station in life, but what he wants now is the newest of the new girls, even though Betty threatened him with castration, and a quick sauteeing of the severed gonads, if he so much as lays a hand on this one, because this one is Betty's eighteen-year-old granddaughter, Nichole.

"You know why," Nichole says to Bill, stopping her task of placing cold butter pats in the monkey dishes she has lined up on the wooden work table just long enough to give the man's too-close body an elbow to the ribs, "Grandma doesn't like you?" Bill grunts at the jab to his side and says, "because she is a nasty, mean-spirited old bitch who can't stand to see a guy have a little fun?" "No," Nichole replies, placing the monkey dishes on a tray so she can carry them out to the dining room. "It's because you come on to all the young girls but you ignore her," and Nichole's eyes widen for emphasis as she tacks on the word, "Stupid." And then she is gone, pushing out into the dining room, leaving the doors swinging behind her.

Bill scratches his elbow and rubs the sore spot on his ribs. He looks at the service window as Betty's scowling and suspicious face appears. She puts a ticket on the wheel and says, "Order up, shithead," and then she is gone, too, shouting to Nichole to hurry up and clear table seven.